

Pirates: An Introduction



Books, movies, and television have glamorized pirates and their lives. The names of Blackbeard, Sir Henry Morgan, Captain Kidd, and others intrigue many of us. Books, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, thrill readers with the stories of pirate adventures.

The real life of a pirate was not glamorous, however. It was full of violence, discomfort, and hard work. It also included drunkenness and often even hunger. Pirate ships were dark, damp, and filled with the stench of stale water and rotten meat. Pirates often lived in the company of beetles, cockroaches, maggots, and rats. Often diseases killed over half of the crew members.

A pirate always had to be on the lookout for enemies, officials, and, at times, even his fellow crew members. Pirate captains were often cruel. Captain Kidd once tied up an entire crew by their arms and left them in the hot sun until they told him the location of their gold.

A **pirate** robbed and destroyed ships and towns of any nation. A **privateer** was a person hired by a government to attack enemy ships and settlements. This meant that a privateer had some legal basis for his actions. Some men were both pirates and privateers during their lives.

Even though the pirates were violent outlaws, they did have their own rules. They made their own laws and were quite democratic. The men usually elected the captain. They chose him because of his knowledge of sailing and his ability to lead. He would remain captain as long as he was able to bring in treasure. The pirates also had their own courts to settle quarrels and select punishments. Flogging became a common punishment.

Pirates mainly attacked ships, but they also made raids on settlements. Pirates often, but not always, killed their victims. They would take anything of value, and all of the members of the crew divided the treasure. It was important for the captain to be successful at raiding to keep the men happy.

Pirate ships were often smaller and faster than merchant ships and warships. This let them move more quickly during chases and attacks.

Each pirate captain had his own flag or "Jolly Roger." The Jolly Roger was displayed on the ship's mast. Most of these flags had images of death or time passing. A favorite design of pirate flags included a skull and crossbones.

Many legends survive of buried pirate treasure. However, through the years, treasure hunters have located only a few riches. The pirates divided the treasure among themselves, and they often sold it quickly. Most of the legends of vast, hidden fortunes are not true.

Officials captured and punished only a few of the pirates. The most common punishment for piracy was a public hanging. After the hanging, officials often displayed the head or body of the pirate in a public place. This was a warning to others of the danger of becoming a pirate.

Most pirates were men. Pirates believed it was unlucky to have women on their ships. In spite of this superstition, a few women pirates became infamous. Anne Bonny and Mary Read roamed the Caribbean. Grace O'Malley was a famous Irish pirate. Madame Yih sailed along the Chinese coast.

Pirates have existed throughout history. They were common in ancient times. The Phoenician civilization, as well as the Greek and Roman civilizations, had pirates. Pirates once captured and held young Julius Caesar for ransom for six weeks. Piracy in Roman times became so common that the ruler, Pompey, had a fleet clear the Mediterranean Sea of pirates. He then had regular patrols to keep shipping safe.

The most famous pirates during the Middle Ages prowled the northern coast of Africa. The Barbary Coast was the name of this territory. Pirates of the region became known as the Barbary corsairs. They often attacked many members of the Crusades. The Barbary Coast pirates continued their raids until the 1830s, when France conquered territory in Algeria.

During the Middle Ages, many Europeans engaged in piracy. The Vikings were pirates, as well as explorers and traders. The English, Irish, and Welsh also engaged in piracy.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, English pirates and privateers attacked Spanish ships and settlements. These Englishmen, known as "sea dogs," included Sir Francis Drake, Sir Henry Morgan, and Sir John Hawkins. The English tried to hire privateer Jean Laffite to attack American ships during the War of 1812, but Laffite refused the British and helped the Americans instead.

Perhaps the most famous pirates were those who operated in the waters of the Caribbean. The golden age of the Caribbean pirates lasted through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pirates from England, France, the Netherlands, and Spain all operated in this area.

Piracy was also common in the Persian Gulf and Asia. The feudal lords of Japan often sponsored attacks on Chinese ships from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries.

Little piracy has occurred during the twentieth century. However, the lives of pirates are still of interest to most people.



Name _____ Date _____

Questions for Consideration

1. What was the title of Robert Louis Stevenson's famous book about pirates?

2. What, other than battles, often killed over half of a pirate ship's crew?

3. What was the name given to men hired by a government to raid enemy ships?

4. How did a person most often become the captain of a pirate crew?

5. What was a common form of pirate punishment?

6. What was the name given to a pirate flag?

7. What was the favorite design on a pirate flag?

8. What was the most common punishment for pirates captured by officials?

9. Who were four famous female pirates?

10. What famous Roman was a pirate captive for six weeks?

11. What was the name given to the northern coast of Africa during pirate times?

12. What were English privateers known as?

13. When was the "golden age" of Caribbean pirates?

Name _____ Date _____

Vocabulary Building

The following is a list of words used in the introductory narrative. Look up each of them in a dictionary and copy the meaning on this sheet. After the meaning, write the word in a sentence, using the word appropriately, or give an example of the word.

1. intrigue: _____

2. pirate: _____

3. privateer: _____

4. stench: _____

5. democratic: _____

6. flogging: _____

7. mast: _____

8. infamous: _____

9. ransomed: _____

10. reign: _____